

# THE LIVABILITY OF A POLITICAL LIFE

## ON THE PARADIGMATIC CASE OF VIOLENT ECONOMIZATION BETWEEN MORAL ECONOMY AND DEBT ENSLAVEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Political experiences do not yield a clear-cut notion of the political; rather, they call for a hermeneutical articulation of their political dimension in spaces and orders of dissension which in turn require their revision in terms of contested notions of the political. Every definition of the political will be open to further revisions in political dissent, conflict and strife. In this perspective, a hermeneutic circularity between political experiences, interpretations of the political and political orders turns out as unavoidable. My paper refers to recent discussions on the relations between guilt, owing and debts in the context of violent forms of economization (debt enslavement) in order to demonstrate ways in which this circularity works and may prove to be fertile.

### KEYWORDS

Forms of life, the political, economization, debts, violence, livability.

## I

Human beings did not and do not always live a political life. Where they began to do so, this must be understood as a result of processes of original politicization which engender the institutionalization of political forms of life (*bioi*). Human life, however, cannot be subjected to a *total* politicization. (A phantasma that was time and again – from James Joyce to Aldous Huxley and Emmanuel Levinas – denounced as a nightmare.) Whenever politicization takes place, resistances against total politicization can be observed. Consequently, differences between human life *as object* of politicization on the one hand and the *result* of this process on the other hand always remain more or less visible and inextinguishable. Some phenomenologists maintain that wherever political experience occurs in processes of politicization, *the political* emerges at the same time, that is, political experience makes

evident in what respect it is to be regarded as ‘political’ in the first place.<sup>1</sup> Seen this way, political experience that deserves its name and the foundation (*Stiftung*) of the political coincide.

In contrast to such a position, I claim, referring to Paul Ricoeur, that the phenomenology of the political cannot be grounded on the presupposition that the political becomes by itself obvious in political experience. Phenomenology, Ricoeur maintains, is possible only as phenomenological hermeneutics which admits that the phenomena in question do not interpret themselves<sup>2</sup>; rather, they call for contestable processes of interpretation (*verstehen, auslegen, interpretieren*) which must be regarded as open to dissension. From this follows that every interpretation of political experience *as political* will be contentious and should accept this.

The political dimension of human experience is not evident. Certain experiences may ‘present themselves’ as ‘obviously’ political. But from a hermeneutical point of view this obviousness is limited to pseudo- or *prima-facie*-evidence which depends on processes of intersubjective approval, validation and rectification. To admit this implies to realize that the political dimension of human experience depends entirely on different perspectives of others and eventually on their consent – at least in the sense that they agree to disagree with respect to a more or less deep misunderstanding, *dissens* or conflict that is at stake – whatever its prospect may be: consensus and pacification or prolonged strife (*Unfriede*), *stásis* (rebellion, *Aufstand, Aufruhr*) and even *pólemos* (war).

It is well known that Carl Schmitt affirmed the polemic potential of any political conflict that deserves its name.<sup>3</sup> To exist politically, he claimed, is to be aware of ones potential enemies and to prepare oneself vis-à-vis their anticipated hostility, misdeeds and atrocities. Any genuine interpretation of political experience *as political*, he claims, must take this polemic potential into account; otherwise it does not deserve to be understood as political at all. In this perspective any true notion of the political comprises a polemological sense. We are free, however, to deny this – without falling into the trap Schmitt has set for us when he claimed that anybody who refuses to accept his definition of the political would ironically be doomed to confirm his position (as an enemy of Schmitt’s notion of the political). We may, rather, accept Schmitt as an adversary, not as a foe or dead enemy, without presupposing that the phenomenology of political experience ‘shows’ by itself or makes it plain that its very political dimension must be interpreted *differently*.

Between political experience that presents itself only *prima facie* as political on the one hand and the notion of the political on the other hand lies a hiatus that

<sup>1</sup> Held 2010: 34.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur 1975; Liebsch 2013a.

<sup>3</sup> Schmitt 1996: 31; Liebsch 2015: part B.

leaves open space for *dissens*<sup>4</sup> which must be held in a certain (already existing, re-established and arranged or reinvented) political order. From this follows in methodological respect that the phenomenology of political experience, the hermeneutics of its very interpretation *as political* and the epistemology of political orders that offer more or less limited scope for heterogeneous experience and interpretation must work together in order to elucidate various configurations of experience and the spaces of its political articulation. Processes of conflicting political articulation, however, should not be regarded as simple expression of the political dimension of the experience under discussion. Rather, they *expose* the sense of the political itself – thereby rendering it open to radical revisions. Currently some of them even go so far as to reject democratic normalizations of a culture of conflict as basically unpolitical or antipolitical.<sup>5</sup> Especially in contrast to philosophers of consensus, critics of a normalized democratic culture of conflict urge to reconsider radical conflicts that cannot get sublated in political forms of reconciliation. True ‘politics’, they maintain, occurs only where consensus, reconciliation and pacification is impossible and, consequently, not even sought and longed for. I will not go into the details of this rather polemical position here with which I have dealt elsewhere. I refer to it here only as a prominent example for ongoing revisions of the configuration of political experience, its interpretation as political and references to particular (democratic) orders which open at least some latitude for radical criticism of a predominant understanding of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ as such.<sup>6</sup>

In the following, I propose a different, less polemical way of revision of the triangular configuration of (political) experience, (political) interpretation and (political) order. Instead of proceeding directly from the phenomenology of political experience that takes its political dimension for granted I take recourse to objections against the hegemony of violent orders of economization which are denounced as dominating our political life in an unacceptable way. The prevailing regime of a specific, capitalist system challenges in this view the very livability of our lives and threatens to reduce it to a de-politicized form of existence in a ‘bare’ life that cannot be truly lived. This calls the radical problem to the fore whether we owe every other, strangers included, an answer to the question how his or their life can be truly lived at all. I shall propose to reconsider whether this ‘existential’ question of acceptability with respect to everybody is to be regarded as the minimum that we owe every other. This question brings out into the open that we cannot accept *not* to be indebted to each other at all. The ‘we’ in question is, however, nowhere simply ‘given’. It becomes visible only step by step via lateral communication on what proves to be unacceptable for human beings who want to live a liveable life. My brief re-

<sup>4</sup> Rancière 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Mouffe 1999; 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben et al. 2012.

construction of this discussion is meant to illustrate how negativistic reference to a vigorously criticized political and economic order inspires the phenomenological recourse to corresponding political experiences which do *not* make it *evident* in what respect they make *the political* visible. The *prima facie* political experiences to which I will refer do not yield a clear-cut notion of the political; rather, they call for a hermeneutical articulation of their political dimension in political spaces of dissension which in turn require their revision in terms of contested notions of ‘the political’ – which, at least in my view, will never amount to simple definitions. Every definition of the political will, instead, be open to further revisions in political *dis-sens*, conflict and strife. In this perspective a circularity between political experiences, interpretations and orders turns out as unavoidable.

The following description of recent discussions on the relations between guilt, owing and debts in the context of violent forms of economization present a paradigmatic analysis of the ways in which this circularity works and may prove to be fertile.

## II

What are the recent debates on guilt, on owing something to others, on being indebted to them, and on debts all about? Are they only loosely related phenomena? It may seem so, at least.<sup>7</sup> In German guilt is *Schuld* and debts are *Schulden*. That suggests close etymological, semantic and historical relations between these notions. Recent debates about guilt and debts, *Schuld* and *Schulden*, however, are drifting in two opposite directions – thus obscuring the relatedness of the two phenomena up to a point where they seem to have nothing in common any more. On the one hand, in the past 45 years from Vladimir Jankélévitch’s essay *Pardonner?*<sup>8</sup> (1971), Paul Ricoeur’s late work *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (2000) to Jacques Derrida’s writings on *Avouer – l’impossible* (2001) the philosophical discourse about guilt has concentrated on extreme, radical and excessive, unforgivable crimes which seem to have nothing in common with debts. The moral im-possibility<sup>9</sup> of unconditional forgiveness referred to unforgivable guilt, that is, to excessive, fathomless *Schuld* that cannot be measured – least of all in an economic sense.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand the economic discourse about debts/*Schulden* (which in English and German are regularly put in the plural) has focused on states like Greece which are heavily in debt – without any realistic prospect of ever getting rid of this burden.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Terranova 2014; Liebsch 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. U. Dalferth/Stoellger/Hunziker 2009. The focal point of this volume is a non-privative notion of the im-possible.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur 2000; Jankélévitch 2004; Derrida 2013.

David Malone – who maintains that such a future “awaits us all” – describes this situation explicitly as *debt enslavement*.<sup>10</sup> In both discourses we are confronted with a certain *aporia*: (a) with the im-possibility of any absolution and forgiveness in cases of excessive guilt and (b) with hopeless attempts to find a way out of excessive debts. Apart from this, the moral discourse about guilt on the one hand and the economic discourse about debts on the other hand seem to have nothing in common.

In the following discussion, I shall challenge this and raise the question whether being heavily in debt leads to questions of guilt and *vice versa*. In so doing I do not want to confuse guilt and debts, morality and economics but rather bring to light relations between these notions which may shed light on current processes of violent economization. Thus, I presuppose that, in *distinguishing* guilt and debts, we do not have to *sever* any connection between them systematically and historically. It will be seen that here we do not have to do with phenomena that are *originally* completely different and unrelated.

The same holds true with respect to *perspectives of liberation* from forms of guilt and debts that overburden us. As far as I see, current debates about the notions of guilt and debts undermine any clear-cut and ostensibly comfortable differentiation of the phenomena concerned. It is undeniable that moral discourses very often spread to economic problems in a moralistic manner, for example when trading with debts and speculation with their volatility is denounced as amoral, greedy, short-sighted, totally self-serving, reckless etc. and traced back to *pleonexia*, *hybris* or *addiction* to debts.<sup>11</sup> And the strain of states and peoples with debts can be interpreted in terms of debt bondage that seemingly allows for no way out.

Debt bondage, which I will take as a modern form of economic slavery, is not a purely financial problem. On the contrary, this notion points to a moral dimension of the economic realm – a dimension that we should not relegate to a misleading ‘moralization’ of the alleged auto-nomy of economic processes.

For most of us it is probably hard to decipher what is really going on behind the scenes of what is commonly called the current debt crisis (*Schuldenkrise*). Nevertheless, it is this crisis that recently went out of joint and confronted us with the need to challenge the notions of guilt and debt. Whatever is really going on in the backdrop of this crisis and whatever may eventually explain it – it is up to us to try to understand *now* whether it is only a matter of a failure of economic processes or, rather, whether it reveals a deep moral crisis that engenders issues of guilt/*Schuld*.

While our notion of morality is out of joint where we become entangled in unforgiveable guilt (so that forgiveness seems to be im-possible), the economic is out of joint where it produces forms of being heavily in debt which allow for no escape

<sup>10</sup> Malone 2010: 56, 66, 96, 128; Armstrong 2012; Liebsch 2018, part G.

<sup>11</sup> Malone 2010: 84, 134.

and amount to an economic slavery that threatens to ruin the very economic system in which we measure and try to balance loans and debts.

Here I only loosely follow the traditional notion of debt bondage as it is applicable to certain forms of exploitation which without doubt have not been overcome once and for all. In India these forms are called *bonded labour*, in Latin America *peonaje*. They refer to an indefinitely extended pawn of one's very life that is doomed to compensate endlessly a debt which the debtor has run up and cannot pay back. This way, the life of the debtor is completely at the mercy of others – comparable to the misery of a slave. When I use the notion debt bondage or debt enslavement, I am not referring to specific legal constructions such as *bonded labour* or *peonaje*. Rather, proceeding from these notions I want to raise the question whether the capitalist excesses of the last four decades require a re-moralization of the economic sphere itself insofar they have amounted to a violent subjugation of peoples which we should not dismiss as a temporary pathology of an otherwise regularly functioning economy. Did this subjugation not make it obvious what *must* happen if we give free reign to the economic in its most 'advanced' forms, radically decoupled from any social and political embeddedness?<sup>12</sup> To let things take their course means with regard to economics: that it becomes – seemingly – autonomous, that it develops beyond *kapēlikē* and *chrēmāstikē*<sup>13</sup> as forms of profit seeking and ultimately establishes a market economy that leaves any social and political restrictions behind and invents unforeseen mechanisms of capitalizing on money – especially via speculation on interest-bearing debts. “To speculate you don't need any real world stuff at all. It's about betting on derivatives and credit default swaps and other unworldly stuff for rewards that are instantaneous.”<sup>14</sup>

The enduring financial crisis of our time makes it clear what this may ultimately amount to: minimizing one's own investments, investing only capital that one need not earn but, instead, borrows from others in order to transfer it to debtors from whose financial returns one lives. Such a mechanism works perfectly if one does not need to earn something beforehand (in terms of productive labour), if as a creditor one invests only other people's capital at their risk and keeps debtors in a position that condemns them to reimbursement without end – that is, without any chance to pay off their permanent debt in full. Someone who invests capital that is not his own and makes sure that the debtors will never be able to pay off what was given to them will be in a very comfortable position forever. Debts and interest rates ... will ideally 'work' for the creditors while making any 'real work' on their part superfluous.

<sup>12</sup> Polanyi 12015: 61–75.

<sup>13</sup> Polanyi 1979: 182.

<sup>14</sup> Malone 2010: 134.

This mechanism, however, conjures up the breakdown of the entire economic system if the debtors are pressed so hard that they have to refuse any reimbursement as their measure of last resort. If they are clever enough, the creditors will seek to avoid this and slow down any process that runs the risk of a complete meltdown of the economic system. In order to stave off such an ‘unthinkable event’<sup>15</sup>, they must learn *to keep* the debtors in their desolate position – without ever letting them off the hook.

“The essence of debt as power for creditors lies in its very permanence.”<sup>16</sup> If they are successful, the debtors will never be able to establish a balanced budget and will be kept in an economic misery that allows for no escape. If the creditors are not successful and are at risk of bankruptcy (as indebted states begin to default), they will demand time and again a bail-out – thereby threatening states that for the time being are wealthy with a bankruptcy that could ultimately amount to “a cascade of indebted nations defaulting on their loans”.<sup>17</sup> If an escalation of this kind will sooner or later inevitably result from a dis-embedded, seemingly autonomous economy that gives free reign to any speculative interest in profit, must we not, then, search for another sort of economy which does *not* conjure up such a form of economic enslavement?

Some critiques of recent capitalism agree with this and welcome the undeniable signs of its dissolution. They want to make us believe that the future has a re-embedded, re-socialised economy or another economy, a radically transformed economy, in store for us. Their opponents are afraid that any attempt to radically transform the prevailing economic system would dash it to pieces. From the very beginning such an attempt would risk, we are told time and again, the immediate loss of the most important, non-economic ‘capital’ on which economic systems must rely: confidence and trust. Not personal trust between social beings, to be sure, but rather the anonymous, systemic trust that depends directly on the ‘nervousness’ of the stock markets and the non-linear volatility of their indexes. Are we, then, all susceptible and subject to blackmail in view of our dependency on this trust? Are we all (at least 99% of ‘us’) slaves in the face of a faceless system that sooner or later engenders irreversible debt bondage and that we must nevertheless try to maintain at all costs? Must we have a far-reaching interest in the maintenance of this system even when we refuse to gain profit from it?

This *double form of enslavement* seems to be the direct and unavoidable consequence of an aroused and inventive economy that leaves its beginnings in *kapēlikē* and *chrēmatisikē* far behind – which, as Aristotle observed, already knew “no limit”.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>16</sup> Di Muzio, Robins 2016: 20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 56, 66, 96, 128, 153.

After the invention of a “free market economy” that imposes on everything and everybody a price for which alienable land and goods, things and persons can be sold, bought and capitalized, we find ourselves in a state of complete dependence vis-à-vis this system. Just at the point where we begin to realize this, criticism of the prevailing debt economy turns out to be a moral questioning of ‘the economic’ itself. If ‘the economic’ must, after its dis-embedded ‘autonomization’, lead to debt bondage as a new form of enslavement, it puts radically into question whether all those who suffer from it can live any longer a life that can be properly called by this name. What is at stake here is the very *livability* of our lives, something that is never guaranteed from the start.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, that we can live a life that deserves its name must be *politically secured* – whether we are ‘political animals’ or not. Not even Aristotle, who coined this notion, took it for granted that human beings or members of a *polis* could live a life worth its name simply by themselves.

From Aristotle to Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière, theorists of ‘the political’ have made it plain that the liveability of human life must rest on an institutional reality which we must ‘realize’ again and again without ever taking for granted that it is simply ‘given’ and will prove reliable without our own efforts.<sup>19</sup>

Before the invention of a market economy (in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century) no one ever believed that human life can or should be determined solely economically. Paradoxically, it was only the excessive success of an ‘unfettered’ economy that brought this question to the fore: whether and how deeply we are economic beings and nothing else. The questionable success of the modern economization of almost everything and everybody provoked – perhaps for the first time in history – the radically negative answer: we *cannot* and we *do not want* to understand ourselves as purely economic beings.

The prevailing dominance of an economic system that suggests the opposite challenges the very livability of our lives – especially when it comes to a form of dependency on economic conditions which amounts to a new form of slavery. Theorists of the economic, however, have been telling us for years that any ‘moralization’ of the economic with respect to human life would necessarily amount to a misleading anachronism. Did the economic not in fact long ago become a functionally differentiated and autonomous ‘sphere’ of modern societies? Isn’t it anachronistic to re-moralize the economic in terms of valuations such as good vs. bad, right vs. wrong or to ‘blame’ it for faults such as “systemic corruption”<sup>20</sup> and to (re-) connect it with questions of guilt and responsibility for violent consequences?

I maintain that this is in fact inevitable insofar as the current debt economy itself brings about moral consequences, especially forms of enslavement, which

<sup>18</sup> Butler 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Liebsch 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Di Muzio, Robins 2016: 206.



contradict the very modernity of this economy.<sup>21</sup> The modern market economy was from the start designed as a realm of economic freedom, of the free play of economic forces which is supposed to guarantee the wealth of nations.<sup>22</sup> Debt bondage, however, which results from a completely disembodied interest in profit amounts to a modern form of slavery that seems to subjugate states like Greece once and for all and threatens to reduce the majority of the population to a ‘bare’, depoliticized life that can hardly be ‘lived’ any longer (at least not in an acceptable sense). In the end, this life must realize that it has been reduced to a state of ‘Vorhandenheit’, of ‘mere’, i. e. politically meaningless life, which no longer ‘counts’ politically. Under the yoke of debt a human, social and political life is in danger of despoliation of its very *livability*.

From this negative collective experience emerges an inevitable re-moralization of the economy. If the latter brings about such a reduction to ‘bare life’ that has no good prospect of liberation from its predicament, the debt economy loses all moral ground. In fact, in the face of such denigrating consequences of the current debt economy we re-discover that there is no (acceptable) future in it unless we make sure that (and how) it rests on a fragile acceptability on the part of indebted peoples. When they can no longer see a way out of their predicament the following questions concerning causes, reasons, responsibility and guilt for the fact that the debt economy has run out of control must inevitably arise and call for answers:

– Do we have to go back to Aristotle’s analysis of *kapēlikē* and *chrēmastikē* in order to understand how a politically limited and embedded economy can escalate via *specific forms of economic transactions* into an excessive dynamics of accumulation of capital?

– Or is it a *moral* problem of usury – as moralists make us believe?

– Or a matter of collective financial *speculation* within the framework of a demoralized market (as in the famous *tulip mania* in the Netherlands [1636–37])?

– Or is it a matter of debt as technology of differential accumulation of power that was invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to subjugate indebted subjects?<sup>23</sup>

– Or do we have to look for the deeper reasons in the *constitution of modern societies* as “Systeme des Bedürfnisses” (Georg W. F. Hegel) that for the first time in history have begun to expose everybody to a merciless economic competition for the sake of ever-increasing accumulation of capital of all sorts?<sup>24</sup>

– Or do we have to look for a convincing explanation of the current debt crisis in more proximate economic constellations such as the global liberalization of the financial sector after the Vietnam War and the abolition of the gold standard?<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hegel 1986: 437.

<sup>22</sup> Smith 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Di Muzio, Robins 2016: 17, 88, 100, 105.

<sup>24</sup> Riedel 1969: 135 ff.; Piketty 2014: 9, 565.

<sup>25</sup> Vogl <sup>2</sup>2011.

– Or is the recent deregulation of the global economy only the last and most obvious consequence of the specifically modern dis-embedding of the economic as described by Polanyi?

Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement “there is no such thing as society” makes it plain that this liberalization and deregulation was meant as a de-politicisation: The deregulators appeared as alleged liberators of the economic who wanted to release it from any political restrictions. The flip side of the liberation of the economic was a radical individualism. Economic relations purportedly exist only between individuals (a) who are considered to be fundamentally *ontologically unrelated*, (b) who *enter* into economic relations *only on the basis of their free discretion* and (c) who can *quit* their economic relations with others whenever they want. When their accounts with others are settled, they again become fundamentally unrelated to them – as they had been before.

If we maintain, contrary to these individualistic propositions, that we exist as social beings (because we owe our own existence to generative relations, to say the very least in this respect) and that there are in fact societies – even though not as ‘things’ or separate ontological entities as Durkheim would have it<sup>26</sup> – we must take into account that the aforementioned questions cannot be reduced to issues of causes and reasons for the fact that the debt economy has run out of control.

This becomes obvious in diverse forms of moral criticism directed against this economy. Many critics have tried to re-moralize the capitalist market system as such. This is evident in criticism of exploitation, estrangement and violation of universal interests brought forward by authors ranging from Karl Marx and Georg Lukács to Peter L. Berger, Jürgen Habermas and Nico Stehr.<sup>27</sup>

Others have claimed that only certain excesses of the market economy must be put down to human greed, *pleonexia* and *hybris*, which they attribute to single individuals (market fraudsters), to certain cliques, elites or to classes such as “the wealthy” or “the financial class”.<sup>28</sup> Authors such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Georges Soros and Viviane Forrester have suggested that such morally questionable tendencies have run out of control – thereby engendering de-moralizing consequences for the moral substance of whole societies.<sup>29</sup>

This kind of criticism often goes hand in hand with pleas for the rehabilitation of pro-social virtues – as if a moral answer to the current debt crisis would suffice (an answer that would doubtless leave the market economy intact and unchallenged).

<sup>26</sup> Durkheim 1895; Marchart 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Habermas <sup>5</sup>1979; Berger 1986.

<sup>28</sup> Malone 2010: 238, 222.

<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre <sup>2</sup>1984; Himmelfarb 1995; Forrester 1997; Soros 2000: 27; Stehr 2007: 25 ff.; Miegel 2011: 14–19.

Instead of immanent-restorative moralizations of the capitalist market economy cultural anthropologists from Marcel Mauss to Marcel Hénaff have advocated a radical reconsideration of the social basis of any economic behaviour. They claimed to go back to the social origins of the economic itself. In so doing, they wanted to find out how it is (and must be) inherently related to the moral dimension of human coexistence. Otherwise, they suggested, *the economic would turn itself against human relations in violent forms of economization – which can only be criticized on the basis of a negativistic stance.*

This stance basically means that human, social beings *cannot accept* a complete dissociation of their economic and moral life because what makes them ‘social’ beings is precisely an integral conjunction of the moral and the economic. If this conjunction breaks down the very sociality of their co-existence is in danger. Where this danger is felt, a dissociation of the moral and the economic is experienced as a *violent deformation* of human, social co-existence. And when we object to such a deformation we re-claim basically *what we have been* (from *sociétés archaïques* onward) and *what we still are* and *must try to remain* – if we refuse to be reduced to de-socialized beings in an individualized life without society.

This anthropologically oriented criticism does not intend to lend support to a revival of virtues that would leave a disembedded economy unchallenged; instead it goes back to the common origins of the economic and the moral in order to demonstrate that human sociality basically rests on a *moral economy*<sup>30</sup> that resists any dissociation of the moral on the one hand and the economic on the other hand. Mauss demonstrates this in his description of archaic exchange processes that interweave debts and feelings of indebtedness which give rise to a sense of duty, obligation and guilt vis-à-vis others with whom one is socially related.

In the second part of my reflections I will try to explicate this in more detail in order to shed light on the question as to whether an anthropological recourse to a seemingly ‘archaic’ moral economy may contribute to a better understanding of a present that confronts us with far reaching dissociations of questions of debts (*Schulden*) on the one hand and questions of responsibility, duties and guilt (*Schuld*) on the other hand.

In view of manifold differentiations of the moral and the economic I take it for granted that we cannot rehabilitate an *identity* of the moral and the economic. But that does not imply that we must come to terms with a *schism* of the moral and the economic. What is at stake is rather whether we can take these differentiations into account without losing sight of how the moral and the economic must *cross over* and thereby prove to be *minimally related* if we are not to forfeit the very sociality of our co-existence.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J. Oldham Appleby 1978: ch. 3.

### III

The current debt crisis that obviously affects not only countless individuals but also states and even supra-national political entities such as the EU and the whole economic system of the entire world, inspires diverse authors in their attempts to uncover the ‘original’ and lasting basis of a ‘human’ economy that deserves this name. It is well known that especially Marcel Hénaff and David Graeber referred in this context to Marcel Mauss’ theory of the gift. Mauss demonstrated how closely related three elements of exchange processes were in archaic societies: acts of giving, acts of receiving and moral obligations to reciprocate in order to keep these processes going and to maintain the relations themselves. In Mauss’ perspective the most important aspect is the ‘spirit’ of reciprocity that is itself not given away and wasted in exchange processes but, rather, deepens and strengthens social relations which make the participants feel acknowledged, respected and recognized.

I cannot discuss here whether Mauss was successful in his attempts to fathom the origin of social obligations, duties and debts (i.e. notions which we do not find clearly separated from each other in archaic forms of life).<sup>31</sup> I wish to draw attention only to the normative kernel of social reciprocity, which is based on the following presumptions: (a) anybody can enter into a social, reciprocal relation as giver and receiver; (b) by way of social exchange a sort of balance can be established that (b.1) avoids any irreversible imbalance and (b.2) allows the exchange for the time being to come to an end so that the partners involved are ‘even’ with each other; (c) this, however, does not dissolve their relation itself. On the contrary, a positive social exchange deepens and strengthens it – insofar as the encounter of the partners took place ‘in the spirit of giving’ which is never given away like things which we give away.

In Mauss’ perspective, this ‘spirit of giving’ is a *moral spirit* that proves to be inseparable from the exchange of things, goods and capital of any kind. And he insists in the conclusion of his famous essay on the gift that this moral spirit must still be the ultimate basis of any economic exchange – unless this exchange is considered to be a ‘purely’ economic (that is: socially meaningless) process.

Hénaff and Graeber seem to agree with Mauss in this respect: the anthropological analysis of reciprocity demonstrates how the moral and the economic belong to each other and how they must go hand in hand in order to prevent a dissolution of the social altogether. Seen that way, severe consequences are to be expected if a seemingly autonomous economy begins to predominate that loses sight of the indispensable internal conjunction between the moral status of social subjects of reciprocity on the one hand and economic exchange relations on the other hand in which acts of giving, receiving and giving in return take place.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. M. Sahlins 1972; Derrida 1991.

In a de-moralized economy exchange processes become possible which seemingly no longer rely on primordial social relations and which do not lead into such relations. They only presuppose beings who somehow already exist but are basically unrelated (*'vorhandene' Wesen*) and are able to calculate their conduct with respect to the expected behaviour of others and their own advantage. No consideration is given to the questions where these beings 'come from', on what their very being is based and on what it depends.

When economic processes come to a standstill only emptiness reigns unless new economic interests arise which will engender economic processes of the same kind as before. Apart from this, the worst case in this scenario would be becoming indebted to others without being able to pay back. This would amount to irreversible dependence on others, in the extreme case to an economic enslavement that would leave only minimal latitude for free action or even lead to economic death.

This, however, raises no moral problem if the economic has previously been subjected to a thorough de-moralization. In a purely economic perspective on human relations three questions cannot be adequately dealt with: (a) whether (and for what) we are indebted to each other in a non-economic, moral sense of this word; (b) why an economic relation should be protected from any irreversible imbalance; and (c) why economic processes in which participants have settled their debts with each other should not dissolve their relations completely.

To these questions Mauss' theory of reciprocity seemed to offer a comprehensive answer. What is basically at stake in social relations is their very maintenance, he claimed. Thus, they must prevent both the radical dissolution and prolonged imbalances of relations which exist before any concrete exchange and should 'survive' even enduring imbalances.

Theorists who appeal to Mauss today accordingly insist that his analysis of the social-anthropological dimension of exchange processes is not limited to 'archaic' forms of life and that their 'moral economy' applies to modern societies as well – at least insofar as they, too, must resist any radical dissolution of social relations – be it through irreversible economic imbalances, be it by way of settling accounts with each other. The same theorists reject a capitalist economy in which it seems to be a foregone conclusion that enduring economic relations that are one-sidedly disadvantageous and detrimental result in irreversible debts and, consequently, debt bondage.

Graeber, who also draws on Mauss, knows very well that the currently prevailing economic system time and again conjures up phenomena of debt enslavement. Nevertheless, he insists, we will never become really even with each other. He is convinced that underneath the market economy a basic sociality is still functioning as the basis of social relations which were only economized secondarily – without ever being absorbed in purely economic systems. The question is, however, how anthropological insights into the moral economy of archaic societies – provided they

reveal a sociality that still underlies our present life – can challenge the debt economy that is prevalent today.<sup>32</sup>

This question cannot be posed adequately unless several cardinal differences (1–5) between archaic forms of life and modern societies are taken into account:

(1) Mauss' moral economy was attributed to *sociétés archaïques*, but not (at least not directly) to modern societies. His concept did not refer to horizons of anonymous co-existence with numerous unknown people.

(2) This raises the question how the 'deep' sociality of reciprocity that Mauss deemed to be observable in archaic forms of life is related to modern forms of social co-existence. Does this sociality still underlie modern life? Must we consider the diachronic pre-history of modern societies to be present in the synchronic vertical dimension of our social and economic life? (Hegel<sup>33</sup>)

(3) The way we belong to a (post-)modern society cannot be realized (only) in concrete face-to-face-relations. Consequently, what we owe to each other cannot (only) manifest itself in the direct reciprocity of such relations. What, then, do we owe to each other if we are *not* directly related by way of reciprocal relations? And how can we gain insight into this 'owing' at all? Is it inevitable, in modern societies at least, that 'direct' relations and relations in anonymous coexistence are separate and that this must also apply to the moral and the economic that form an integral unit in archaic forms of life if Mauss' theory holds true?

(4) No, answer the philosophers of the modern state who ascribe the status of moral and legal subjectivity to *citizens*. Only the subjectivity of citizens, they claim, can be indebted, responsible and guilty. The notions of debts (*Schulden*) and guilt (*Schuld*) make sense only with regard to human, civil subjects who can be held responsible for what they owe – either in a moral or in an economic sense of 'owing'. Citizens are born into an *esse morale*<sup>34</sup> that expresses itself in moral conscience. At the same time citizens are members of a social community that imposes obligations on them: to be true to one's word, to observe one's duties, to respect contracts (*pacta sunt servanda*) etc.

Since Kant's *Metaphysik der Sitten* and Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* philosophers have debated endlessly about the moral and ethical basis of citizenship. Durkheim was perhaps the last figure to believe in a clear-cut solution to this problem. In his Sorbonne lectures on the sociology of morals<sup>35</sup> he came to the well-known conclusion that a life that is economically and morally *truly socialized* is possible only under the quasi-sacred, supreme authority of a collective. In the last instance, he believed, only this authority forces the members of a society to

<sup>32</sup> Cf. B. Liebsch 2013b: 29–59.

<sup>33</sup> Hegel 1994: 182 f.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Kobusch 1998: 743–761.

<sup>35</sup> Durkheim 1950.

comply with their economic and moral obligations, duties and debts. Compliance with what one owes (morally and/or economically) to others is in this perspective a *societal* phenomenon, and society cannot be understood without taking into account what one owes to others. Thus, Durkheim seems to insist on an *identity of society, morality and economics*. In this perspective, he seems to prove the inner relatedness of modern societies and the aforementioned moral economies which his nephew Mauss some years later described in his theory of the gift with respect to *sociétés archaïques*. In both cases we have to do, at least at first glance, with *faits sociaux totaux* which do not allow for any clear-cut division between guilt, debts and obligations.

The theoretical price Durkheim had to pay for this strategy is quite high, it seems. He almost seamlessly integrated the moral and the economic in his theory of modern societies. Accordingly, he was not able to pay sufficient attention to the phenomenon of indifferent money and capital. Money makes not only everything convertible, exchangeable and subject to calculations. As a medium of commerce it is indifferent with respect to everything that is dealt with economically. This indifference or “Qualitätslosigkeit“ of money – the “alien mediator” – and capital is also transferred, according to Georg Simmel<sup>36</sup>, to the subjects of commerce – in fact transgressing every border as “raumüberspringende Macht“ (Karl Marx) – so that it ultimately becomes absolutely indifferent where these subjects are, who they are and to which community or society they belong.<sup>37</sup>

(5) To cut a long story short: money and capital break up any social, societal and political nexus so that they can ‘emancipate’ themselves from any moral-economic embeddedness and sever every tie with questions of ‘owing’, indebtedness, duties and guilt.

In contrast to an a-moral economy diverse philosophers – reclaiming the ‘primacy of the political’ – posit a global society with reference to ancient cosmopolitanism, to scholastic doctrines and especially to Kant’s theory of a *Weltbürgergesellschaft*. If such a society in fact exists – at least *in statu nascendi* – it must confront us with the radical question how we, in horizons of anonymous co-existence, are related to each other, what we owe each other and whether we are indebted to each other. I take it for granted that this question cannot simply be answered via recourse to conceptions of “people like us” (Richard Rorty<sup>38</sup>) – Europeans and/or Americans – and to a unilateral generalization of their political self-image.

Instead of simply enlarging the circle of ‘us’ via progressive integration of others into ‘our’ political self-image in order to establish a universal ‘we’ (as Rorty would have it) I propose a negativistic approach. This approach does not impose ‘our’

<sup>36</sup> Simmel 1989: 61.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Lazzarato 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Rorty 1989.

political conceptions on strangers but rather works out what we owe to each other proceeding from the negative experience that any sense of belonging to others, being indebted to them and feeling guilt for their fate is denied, denigrated, devalued or ignored altogether.

In a negativistic perspective, we must subject these experiences to a critical test of their acceptability. Such a test may bring out whether (and in what respect, to what extent etc.) 'we' and others *cannot* at all *accept* that we are *not* indebted to each other, that we owe each other simply *nothing* etc. Nowhere is the 'We' in question simply 'given'. Instead, we must 'work it out' of negative experiences which imply that – at least in the trans-national and global horizon of political co-existence – no 'we' exists at all; at least not as a 'given' phenomenon.

This indeed seems to follow from a global economization that casts states, nations and whole populations into new forms of debt bondage, that is, into new forms of (economic) slavery *without even suggesting that this confronts 'us' with a moral problem*. Within a 'modern' society that denies any form of slavery, irreversible debts *must* pose a moral problem. If, however, a global civil society does not yet exist or is stuck in a prolonged *status nascendi*, it remains open to question whether and how seemingly irreversible economic debts must pose such a problem for others who are not directly involved in them.

#### IV

Let me now summarize the preceding considerations and resume the discussion of the issue of *violent economization*.

1. Today we cannot take recourse to morally and economically integrated forms of life (as they were studied by Mauss and his admirers). Such forms of life may have characterized archaic societies which resisted a dissociation of debts and reciprocal feelings of moral indebtedness. How a 'moral economy' of this kind may still 'underlie' (post-)modern societies and guarantee their social foundation is far from clear.

2. Modern societies have released an economic dynamics that fragmented any previously integrated society. This does not, however, mean that money and capital of any kind will dominate our life once and for all. This holds true even with respect to societies which suffer under their economic subjugation in new forms of debt bondage, that is, financial enslavement, because like every kind of slavery, debt bondage also harbours an element of voluntariness.

Because of this, enslavement is, at least in principle, reversible, as Étienne de la Boëtié, Michel de Montaigne's friend, taught us. Enslaved peoples may 'forget' this for a long time. But when they no longer see any way out, they may call their political existence to mind and reclaim it in their protest against forms of economization that deny them a truly *liveable* life.



Why should they, then, obey the laws of such an economization? Why should they, apart from tactical and strategic economic reasons, feel obliged to respect their rules? Why should they pay their debts back – even when there is no prospect of significantly reducing enduring poverty and regaining economic freedom? Inevitably, prolonged debt bondage that opens no way out must undermine any motivation to submit to its demeaning conditions. (This is currently made obvious in Greece and others states of southern Europe.)

To be sure, this is not only a matter of collective psychological motivations but rather of the objective absurdity of an economic system which can maintain itself only if it subjugates countless individuals, classes and societies in seemingly endless debt enslavement – in striking contrast to the ‘embedded’ origin of the economic (*oikos/nomos*) and also to the ultimate, dis-embedded modernity that many of its defenders claim for the economic.

For creditors trading with debts in technically sophisticated forms such as high frequency trading this system may prove to be effective for some time. In the long run, however, it cannot avoid revealing how questionable it is from a moral point of view which calls for explanations (with respect to the problem how this system came into being at all), for the attribution of responsibilities (as regards the violent implementation and maintenance of this system) and for a radical reconsideration of the question whether we are only economically related to each other, whether we are not otherwise indebted to each other and even guilty for forgetting this.

This ‘moral point of view’ cannot convincingly reclaim an identity of the moral and the economic. On the contrary, it must take manifold differentiations of the moral and of the economic into account.

However, in the face of a complete and radical dissolution of the moral and the economic that brings to light new forms of slavery it must reclaim the very sociality of human co-existence for which the economic and the moral should prove ‘to be good’. If the moral point of view fails to demonstrate this and if it fails to reclaim the primacy of the very sociality of human co-existence, countless individuals and many societies will be doomed to endure their fate – subjugated in endless debt enslavement and thus to a great extent reduced to a de-politicised and de-moralised existence in which there are no longer any politically and morally non-indifferent and responsible relations between people. In the end, nobody would feel indebted in such an existence.

Seen this way, the current debt economy reveals the economic subjugation of societies that leaves no way out of a condition which no longer has any political significance if nobody reclaims the very liveability of the life of numerous individuals. Nobody could ever accept being exposed to such a life without any hope of overcoming it as soon as possible. If such a life is the inevitable consequence of an autonomous economic system, nobody can ever accept such a system.

To reconsider this *'existential' question of acceptability with respect to everybody* is the minimum that we owe every other. Try the negative crosscheck if you find this unconvincing: If we reject this and deny that we are indebted to any other at least in this minimal sense, the consequence would inevitably be that others would morally cease to exist for us at all – and that the same must hold true for us in relation to them.

I hold only the contrary to be acceptable: that nobody can 'deserve' not to 'count' morally for others at all; that means: *not even to raise the question what we owe him or her. What we owe every other is precisely this: at least to pose this question. This means realizing that we are in a social relation with every other person*, even when he or she belongs to a different, far distant form of life or society. Purely economic discourses about debts seem to ignore this completely. From a purely economic point of view monetary debts do not call for any social understanding of our *being indebted to others as the existential correlate of their very existence. They cease to exist (politically, morally and socially) if nobody thinks we owe them at least a consideration of the question what they owe them.* We are indebted to others at least in the face of this question. Nobody deserves to be ignored with respect to it.

To be sure, this question can only be the beginning of a search for concrete answers that clarify what others need in order to be able to live a liveable life. We do not *only* owe others that we pose the question what we owe them. But if this minimal question is lost from sight we have no chance at all of accounting for what it means to co-exist socially for the sake of a *liveable* life.

In my view, the global economization of human relations that engenders new forms of slavery (debt bondage) produces millions of lives which do not 'count' any longer so that exactly this happens: it is increasingly ignored *that* we owe them at least the question *what* we owe them. Where only the economy of debt reigns, questions of being indebted to others fade away – up to a point where uncounted others who are not accounted for cease to exist socially and politically at least in the perspective of their creditors.

This perspective does not only *describe* the economic reality of our time. The economization on which the latter rests is rather the product of a *previous de-socialization of human relations* which cannot be maintained if we keep in mind the question what we owe others.

On the one hand, a 'regressive' way back into the moral economy of archaic forms of life which seemed to offer a comprehensive answer to this question is no longer open.

On the other hand, the radical 'emancipation' of money and capital of all sorts within a purely economic, global system which sooner or later seems to destroy any limited form of life and integrated society has now reached a stalemate. Its global triumph reveals its violence where the power of the negative brings forth what 'we' cannot accept and raises the question who 'we' is.

In my view, this ‘we’ is neither an anonymous *multitude* nor a perfect society of world-citizens (which does not yet exist). Rather, this ‘we’ becomes visible step by step via lateral communication on what proves to be unacceptable for human beings who are keen on living a liveable life that refuses to submit to endless economic subjugation – here, in Europe, and elsewhere, possibly everywhere on earth. This ‘unacceptability’ is, however, not *per se evident* on the basis of a phenomenology of political experience alone. Rather, it comes to the fore only in conflicting processes of hermeneutic articulations of the question in what sense experiences which *prima-facie* present themselves *as political* experiences deserve this attribute.

With regard to suffering from violent economization the starting point of these processes are objections against a capitalist order that threatens to reduce the losers to a bare life to which others owe nothing any more. To deny this means basically to re-claim the most basic political question: how everybody is able and allowed to live a political life – which is perceived, acknowledged and finally recognized as demanding to be seen and to be heard instead of being let down in a bare, de-politicized life that turns out as unliveable.

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